

“We Are Victims of Our Past . . .”—Israel’s Dark History Comes to Light in New Documentaries

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THE 34TH ANNUAL Jerusalem Film Festival opened on July 13 with a screening and greetings in Sultan Pool, a valley in between the West Jerusalem and the Old City. Sitting in the large amphitheater under the open sky, one could see the gorgeous old Jewish neighborhood of Yemin Moshe on one side, and the walls and steeples of the Old City on the other. The next day, three men, Palestinian citizens of Israel, came out of Al Aqsa Mosque and shot two Israeli Druze police officers who were guarding the compound. The police officers, themselves Arabs, died. Their assailants were killed too. This terrible incident started a new cycle of escalated violence and retaliations between Israelis and Palestinians.

But if you were at the beautiful Cinemateque, a site of the Festival, you’d never know about these political and military developments—there it was business as usual. People went to see movies, or spread out on the lawn chairs; they ordered drinks or ice-cream and had lively conversations. From where they sat, they could clearly see not only the Old City, where thousands of Palestinians were protesting the new restrictions, but also the Apartheid wall (or a Separation Barrier, its Israeli euphemism), that cuts across communities in the West Bank. But no one talked about it at the screenings or during the breaks.

This culture of denial is the Israeli reality. It is as if another wall comes in between the vibrant, flourishing, and exciting Israeli cultural production

and the facts of the occupation on the ground. But once in a while, there is a breach in this wall of denial, and through the cracks one can glimpse the pain and the trauma, the terrible toll the violence takes not only on victims but also on perpetrators.

The wall of denial surrounding the past is especially thick. If 1967 is discussed occasionally and reluctantly (think about such films as *The Law in These Parts* or *Censored Voices*), the 1948 is still a non-starter. Whenever the War of 1948 (known in Israel as a War of Independence) is discussed, the violence of Israeli military-in-the-making against the Palestinians is justified as necessary for the survival of the new Israeli nation, which had to be established in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Today, both Israeli and Palestinian cultures exist in the shadow of these original traumas—the Holocaust and the Nakba (the Arab name for the War of 1948). The third generation has been raised with this complicated legacy. This new generation of Israeli artists and filmmakers dare today to deal with that trauma, and not only with the trauma as victims, but also as perpetrators.

Born in Deir Yassin, a new documentary by a young Israeli filmmaker, Neta Shoshani, which premiered at the Festival, is a case in point. Deir Yassin was an Arab village near Jerusalem that signed a non-violence agreement with the nearby Jewish neighborhood of Giv’at Shaul. Both sides adhered to the deal, but in April 1948, the

Zionist paramilitary forces—Irgun and Lehi—conquered the village. When they ran into trouble, they called on the more mainstream Hagannah for help. Approximately 110 villagers were killed, others were expelled. Rumors of a massacre in Deir Yassin spread across Palestine, causing panic and leading to mass exodus of the Arab population. The events in Deir Yassin had far-reaching consequences for both Jews and Palestinians. Arguably, it is at the root of the Palestinian refugee problem, whose displacement paved the way to the establishment of Israel as a Jewish majority state. The massacre at Deir Yassin implicated Zionist forces in violence: the victims turned perpetrators.

After the war, the village stood empty. In 1951, Israel’s government established Kfar Shaul, a mental health hospital at the site of the village. The traces of Palestinian presence were erased.

To this day, Deir Yassin remains a taboo in Israel. Its history is blocked from public consciousness, and to the extent to which it is discussed, it is phrased as a debate of whether the events can qualify as a massacre. *Born in Deir Yassin* brings this dark history into the light. It recovers—or rather attempts to recover—the memory of Deir Yassin from the point of view of the perpetrators. In other words, it’s a brave film.

Born in Deir Yassin is not fueled by attacks and accusations. Instead, it tells a complex and nuanced story, weaving together a conversation with

Dror Nissan, an Israeli man who was born to a mental hospital patient in Kfar Shaul, and interviews with former Zionist underground fighters, who took part in the conquest of Deir Yassin. These veterans are in their late 80s and 90s today, and they had a chance to reflect on their roles in the events. Some of them remain proud of the part they played in what they called a battle for Deir Yassin. Ben Zion Cohen, a fiery former Irgun operative says: “I am proud that I was in the underground . . . that I kicked out the Arabs. They ran away crying ‘Deir Yassin is upon us!’” Uri Yanovsky of Haganah emphasizes the importance of Deir Yassin, which “made possible the establishment of the state.” Shimon Moneta of Lehi, self-identified as a “Jewish terrorist” calls the 1948 war justified. In his view, it was the war for the survival—“we had to fight so that the next generation could be here.” These veterans are so convinced that they are right that Moneta is distraught by the filmmaker’s probing questions; he responds “We went wrong in your education—we failed to explain to our children where did they come from . . .”

But for other veterans, the assessment of the events is less clear-cut. Sarah Ben-Or, who fought with Haganah, speaks of her own trauma. She

recalls the terrible silence that settled on the village after the battle was over and piles of corpses that needed to be buried. “It still haunts me,” she admits. This is the nature of a trauma: “You don’t just remember it—you live it.” Others recall traumatic memories of their own: a horrified Arab child, a woman with her head cut off, a stench of burnt corpses, body parts flung into the air. . . . They do not fully agree on the nature of the events, and their scattered memories do not all add up to a coherent story. Maybe that is the nature of trauma, or maybe it’s an evidence of their conflicted ideological positions.

But in fact, these awful sights were documented. Shraga Peled, who was with Haganah, remembers taking pictures for official documentation. Significantly, he has never seen the photos himself: “I repressed the images,” he explained.

Neta Shoshani documents herself trying to get hold of these photographs, which are still held at the IDF archives. Facing rejection after rejection, she gets all the way to the Supreme Court. The judges examine the photos, and deny her appeal. According to them, the conflict hasn’t been resolved and the exposure of the photographs of such graphic nature may harm Israel’s foreign relations. Paradoxically, this judgement is an

implicit acknowledgment that these images are incriminating. It is also a vivid testimony of Israel’s attitudes to its dark history—the attempt to recover it is halted.

The story of the Deir Yassin massacre is told on screen in parallel with a story of Kfar Shaul, the Israeli mental health hospital. The two stories are different but they overlap in some sort of painful traumatic territory with unresolved past. Hanna Nissan, a mentally ill woman was a reluctant patient in Kfar Shaul in the 1950s-60s. She got pregnant, believing that the birth of a child will heal her, and she would be released. The child—Dror Nissan—was taken away from her. The film recreates Hanna’s diaries and her correspondence with Dror. “This is an evil place,” she writes to him from Kfar Shaul, “Never come here.” But he does.

The connection between the two narratives, that of Deir Yassin and that of Kfar Shaul, comes to the fore in the words of Dror Nissan. “When I came to visit here,” he says after the emotional journey, “I was shocked. I understood that it was ruins of the village—Deir Yassin. . . . A tragic continuity remained: victims exited, other victims entered.” Filmed at night, sitting behind a fence, as if behind bars, Nissan acknowledges that reconciling with his mother’s story was difficult. He wished he could escape his biography, but, he adds, “We are victims of our past.”

Collective memory and Israel’s accountability for the Nakba is also at the center of another documentary, *Jerusalem, We Are Here*, by Israeli-Canadian filmmaker Dorit Naaman. If *Born in Deir Yassin* focuses predominantly on the perpetrators of the Nakba, *Jerusalem* is almost entirely about Palestinians expelled in 1948 from their beloved neighborhood of Qatamon, and their descendants today. It is more than a film: defined



Still from *Born in Deir Yassin*

as an interactive documentary, the project also includes sophisticated layered maps of Qatamon in different eras, as well as careful records of families, businesses, and architecture of every identified house in the neighborhood. In fact, *Jerusalem, We Are Here* is a virtual archive, which comes alive in the video and audio vignettes, which pop up as one moves along the interactive map. (It can be viewed in its entirety at www.jerusalemwearehere.com).

Jerusalem, We Are Here had its local premieres in Jerusalem in May, and in Ramallah and Bethlehem in July. It recently became a basis for a permanent exhibition at Zochrot, a Tel Aviv-based Israeli NGO working to promote accountability for the injustices of the Nakba. The exhibition, including a large interactive installation and a visual biographic archive, launched on July 20, coinciding with the 2017 Jerusalem Film Festival. But unlike the crowded screenings at Cinemateque, the opening at Zochrot attracted a small, albeit dedicated group.

Zochrot's mission is not popular in the current political climate in Israel. *Jerusalem, We Are Here*, with its focus on Palestinian past of the quintessential Jerusalemite neighborhood makes many Israelis uncomfortable. As one of the audience members phrased it, "I don't want to feel guilty." In fact, today Naaman is looking for ways to introduce her documentary, which was originally created for international audiences, to Israelis without putting them on the defense. "How do you tell the story that people don't know and don't want to know?" she asked at the event at Zochrot. "What is our responsibility as Israelis once this story is told?" This is why the documentary is available today in two versions—English and Arabic, whereas Hebrew version is still work in progress.

Qatamon today is an affluent Jewish neighborhood, full of stylish boutiques and restaurants, where one is more likely to hear English or French than



Still from *Jerusalem, We Are Here*

Hebrew. Israelis are simply priced out. The distinctive Arab architecture of the neighborhood's gorgeous buildings is perceived as no more than a style. The Palestinian past of this urban space is thoroughly erased. What *Jerusalem, We Are Here* accomplishes so remarkably is restoration of this past, giving us a sense of what life there was like before 1948.

Back then it was also a wealthy neighborhood, home to a diverse group of people—mainly Christian Arabs, but also Armenian and Greek Orthodox, German colonists, and others. They were educated urban classes, with a taste for city life and culture. The documentary starts with a scene in a movie theater, once known as Regent Cinema (Lev Smadar today). As a red velvet curtain opens theatrically, we hear a pleasant conversation between two people in the audience about this place. "My mother used to come here," says the woman. "My grandfather had his first date with my grandmother here," shares the man. These two are Mona Hajjar Halaby and Anwar Ben Badis, researchers and educators with family roots in pre-1948 Qatamon. Momentarily, Naaman herself joins them in the theater—the three of them then take turns leading us along the streets of Qatamon, switching between English, Arabic, and Hebrew.

The scene in the movie theater is segue to the story of Fernando Shtakleff, an amateur cinematographer who ran Regent Cinema in the 40s. He captured his family on vacation to Haifa, Jaffa, and Tel Aviv: snappily dressed adults, laughing children. Soon though, his camera starts capturing not only the middle-class leisure, but pictures of destruction and violence. This was the start of the war of 1948. Shtakleff's family was eventually expelled.

After the Regent Cinema scene, the documentary can be experienced in two ways: one can follow along the pre-designed tours or switch to the interactive map. The tours take us on virtual walks along the beautiful streets of Qatamon, with stops at the marked houses. From there, a click of a mouse would open additional screens with short videos about the place and its inhabitants or audio testimonies. The interface of the interactive map allows us to see the bird's eye view of the neighborhood in different eras—from 1918, to 1930s and 1940s, to today. A click on a building reveals its brief story, and when available, photographs and documents. One can also toggle between the map and the tour.

Some of the former inhabitants are well known: Khalil Sakakini was an educator and a public intellectual. His

lovely home housed not only his family—whose photographs appear upon a click on the map—but also a massive library (which in 1948 was “transferred” to the Jewish National Archive at the Hebrew University). The family escaped to Cairo, but two of the Sakakini daughters, Dumia and Hala, moved to Ramallah where they lived for the rest of their lives. Hala Sakakini later wrote a memoir, “Jerusalem and I,” where she hand-drew the map of Qatamon from memory.

The daughter of the Karmi family, Ghada, also wrote a memoir, “In Search of Fatima.” The family was driven away from their home in 1948 and settled in London, in Golders Green, ironically, a Jewish neighborhood.

None of these families received any compensation for their properties; today worth millions and millions of dollars. Many have never seen their homes again. Others can come to visit. Ellie Savvides grew up as the daughter of a successful merchant in the neighborhood. As a young girl, she took dance lessons at the Greek Club, a social center for a substantial Greek community. Naaman found a 1946 footage of a dance recital there—young women in art-nouveau-inspired dresses move in the distinctly modernist dance, with young Ellie among them. In 2014, Ellie, now an elegant older woman comes to visit her childhood home from Cyprus, where her family ended up. Naaman’s camera captures a failed negotiation with an Israeli family, occupying the home now to enter and have a look. But Ellie is welcome at the Greek Club, which still serves its much diminished community, offering programs such as Greek dancing, open to everyone. In a poetic and moving moment, the camera captures one of such programs where middle-aged Israelis are dancing in circles, with Ellie joining them and the video of 1946 is projected on the wall, the ghosts and the living dance together. . .

Several testimonies bring up the most traumatic event in the war for the neighborhood, the bombing of Semiramis Hotel, attacked by Hagannah on January 5, 1948. Twenty seven civilians were killed. Taken together, the testimonies and stories in *Jerusalem, We Are Here*, paint a rich picture of the life in the neighborhood, and its subsequent destruction. Significantly, this is a story of urban Nakba, making an important addition to the better known story of takeover of Palestinian villages and displacement of their population.

In that sense, Naaman’s film pays tribute to the influential documentary *House* by Amos Gitai. Back in 1981 Gitai told a story of a building in Jerusalem that was first taken by Israel from Palestinian owners, then passed onto a poor Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) Jewish immigrants, and ultimately, as the gentrification started, was bought by a wealthy Ashkenazi buyer, who then employed Palestinian laborers to renovate the house. That very building is located in Qatamon, on Dor Dor Ve-Dorshav Street, allegedly the most expensive address in Jerusalem today. This trajectory of multiple displacements and injustices, is characteristic of the entire neighborhood.

Naaman’s own position as an Israeli telling the story of Qatamon’s Palestinian past is complicated. She is the first to acknowledge it: “I come from a settler society. I don’t have a way not to benefit from that.” But that doesn’t mean that she can just be complicit. “I think what I am trying to do is to take responsibility for what happened and to complicate the Israeli narrative,” says Naaman. “We need to know our past, in order to be able to have a future.”

This is no small step. Changing the victor’s narrative to include the perspective of the oppressed people and recognition of their story is an important opening for further dialogue. A recent study conducted in Israel and the Palestinian Authority revealed

that when people believe that their enemy acknowledges their victimhood, they are more open to reconciliation. In other words, when Israelis believe that Palestinians acknowledge their victimhood in the Holocaust, and Palestinians believe that Israeli Jews recognize and acknowledge their victimhood in the Nakba, both sides are more likely to make concessions for the sake of peace on divisive issues, including such non-starters as the status of Jerusalem and the Right of Return.¹

The recovery of Israel’s dark past, an open conversation about the grief caused to other people, is arguably the most important step that Israel can take towards the Palestinians, towards recognition of their loss, and to eventually taking responsibility for it. In other words, a step towards peace. Whether Israelis are ready to make this step is another question. It’s true that these two new brave documentaries speak in the minority voices and their reception is controversial. But the mere fact of their appearance in Israel is inspiring hope. ■

Notes

1. Boaz Hameiri and Arie Nadler, “Looking Backward to Move Forward: Effects of Acknowledgment of Victimhood on Readiness to Compromise for Peace in the Protracted Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 2017, 1–15.

2. For full notes contact Chris@tikkun.org

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